

## Progressive Era Muckrakers

→**Directions:** Read the selection below and review the table. When you are done, answer the reflection questions that follow on the next page.

As a result of industrialization and urbanization in the Gilded Age (1870 - 1910), America was changed forever; in some ways the change was positive, and in other ways the changes were negative. The Progressive Era is the name given to the time period between 1890 and 1920; this name reflects the desire of a large group of American citizens to help society “*progress*” or move forward as a result of economic changes during the Industrial Age.

Progressive reform in this time period depended upon journalism as an important tool to raise public awareness of serious societal problems. Investigative journalists encouraged the progressive reform movement by not only informing and educating the public of serious issues, but also by describing the problems in such detail that the government was forced to intervene to correct the injustice. For example in the 1870’s meat and food production became industrial. This helped companies produce meat and food more quickly to meet the demands of the growing American population, but also meant that the food production industry changed radically. New workers were forced to work long hours in often unsanitary conditions. After Upton Sinclair published *The Jungle* detailing the unsanitary practices of a meat packaging plant in Chicago, the US government began to regulate food production; the largest regulation came when President Theodore Roosevelt signed the Meat Inspection Act (1906) and Pure Foods and Drug Act of (1906). The investigative journalists who played a major role in the Progressive Era were known as *muckrakers*. A table of muckrakers and the reform issues they brought to light are below.

Author	Book or Work	Issue they uncovered
Lincoln Steffens	<i>Shame of a City</i>	Corruption in state and city politics
Upton Sinclair	<i>The Jungle</i>	Unsanitary conditions in meat packing industry
Lewis Hines	NCLC (National Child Labor Committee)	Child labor, unsafe and exploitative practices
Ida Tarbell	<i>The History of the Standard Oil Company</i>	Monopolistic and at aggressive business practices of Robber Barons
<b>Jacob Riis</b>	<b><i>How the Other Half Lives</i></b>	<b>NYC tenement housing and unsafe living conditions of immigrants and poorest class</b>

### **Reflection Questions:**

- 1) *Close Reading:* What was the name of the time period between 1880 and 1920 meant to move America forward during the Industrial Age?
  
- 2) *Close Reading:* Who were *muckrakers*?
  
- 3) *Close Reading:* How did *muckrakers* bring about change or help America to move forward?
  - a) *Analysis:* Why do you think their work motivated the government to get involved?
  
- 4) *Analysis:* What constitutional right are muckrakers exercising?
  
- 5) *Analysis:* What are some issues in your community today that you think a muckraker would have been interested in? Why?



## Images from New York City Tenements

→**Directions:** Review the historical context below.

Select one image to analyze.

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**Historical Context:** In the 1800's, New York City grew at a rapid pace and became a thriving city of culture, wealth, and innovation. However, not all residents were wealthy. Many lived in total poverty and dangerous living conditions, especially new immigrants. Jacob Riis immigrated to the United States in 1870; first working as a carpenter, he eventually was able to secure a job as a news reporter at *The New York Tribune*. After some time, he was assigned to be a police reporter and reported on crimes in the New York City slums and tenements. This gave him a firsthand look at the tenements of the Lower East Side of Manhattan where most of the newly arriving immigrants lived. After months of documenting the unsafe living conditions in tenements, Jacob Riis gave a speech and displayed his photographs of the tenements at a church; the talk was titled "How the Other Half Lives".

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### Overall Analysis Questions:

- 1) *Sourcing:* How do you think Jacob Riis' perspective as an immigrant himself might have motivated him to capture these images?
  
- 2) *Close Reading:* What themes or similarities do you see amongst these four images?
  
- 3) *Analysis:* Why do you think Jacob Riis titled his collection of images *How the Other Half Lives*?
  - a) Considering the title, whose attention do you think he was hoping to capture?
  
- 4) *Analysis:* As a muckraker, what do you think Jacob Riis wanted viewers of these images to walk away thinking about?
  - a) What kinds of action or changes do you think he was trying to motivate or inspire?
  
- 5) *Corroboration:* If you wanted to confirm that these images illustrated the true conditions of New York City tenements between 1890 - 1910, what other kinds of historical documents could you research?

[Dens of Death](#) Jacob Riis, 1872



**Analysis Questions:**

- 1) Choose one object in this picture and list as many adjectives as you can to describe it.
  
- 2) What is the most important object in this picture? What makes you say that?
  
- 3) What does the title “Dens of Death” suggest to you about this image and contents of it?
  
- 4) Why do you think Jacob Riis included this image in *How the Other Half Lives*? What did he want people to be aware of? What was he concerned about?

[Yard in Jersey Street \(now gone\) Where Italians Live in the Worst Slums](#) Jacob Riis (before 1898)

Image caption: It costs a dollar a month to sleep in these sheds



**Analysis Questions:**

- 1) Choose one object in this picture and list as many adjectives as you can to describe it.
- 2) What is the most important object in this picture? What makes you say that?
- 3) If you could talk to one of the people in this picture, what would you say?
- 4) Why do you think Jacob Riis included this image in *How the Other Half Lives*? What did he want people to be aware of? What was he concerned about?

[Lodgers in a crowded Bayard Street tenement - "Five cents a spot."](#) Jacob Riis 1890



**Analysis Questions:**

- 1) What is the most important object in this picture? What makes you say that?
  
- 2) If you could talk to one of the people in this picture, what would you say?
  
- 3) Why do you think Jacob Riis included this image in *How the Other Half Lives*? What did he want people to be aware of? What was he concerned about?

[The "Slide" that was the Children's only Playground once](#) Jacob Riis (1898)



**Analysis Questions:**

- 1) What is the most important object in this picture? What makes you say that?
- 2) If you could talk to one of the people in this picture, what would you say?
- 3) Why do you think Jacob Riis included this image in *How the Other Half Lives*? What did he want people to be aware of? What was he concerned about?



## Primary Source Document Analysis

→**Directions:** Read the excerpt from *How the Other Half Lives*, a book that Jacob Riis published in 1890. The book had text as well as the images he had already displayed of New York City tenements. Using the excerpts, answer the analysis questions that follow each chapter. *All terms that are underlined and bolded in the text (like this example) are defined at the end of chapter 4.*

### Close Read

#### Chapter 1: Genesis of the Tenement

...There had been **tenant** houses before, but they were not built for that purpose. Nothing would probably have shocked their original owners more than the idea of their harboring a **promiscuous** crowd; for they were the decorous homes of the old Knickerbockers, the proud aristocracy of Manhattan in the early days. It was the stir and bustle of trade, together with the tremendous immigration that followed upon the war of 1812 that dislodged them. In thirty-five years the city of less than a hundred thousand came to **harbor** half a million souls, for whom houses had to be found...Their comfortable dwellings in the once fashionable streets along the East River fell into the hands of real-estate agents and boarding-house keepers...in its beginnings, the tenant-house became a real blessing to that class of **industrious** poor whose small earnings limited their expenses, and whose employment in workshops, stores, or about the warehouses and **thoroughfares**, render a near residence of much importance...their *large* rooms were partitioned into *several smaller ones* without regard to light or **ventilation**, the rate of rent being lower in proportion to space or height from the street...Neatness, order, cleanliness, were never dreamed of in connection with the tenant-house system...

#### Chapter 1 - Analysis Questions

- 1) *Close Reading:* According to chapter one, who originally lived in the homes that would be later converted to tenements?
  - a) *Close Reading:* Why did Manhattan's aristocracy move out of their grand homes?
  
- 2) *Close Reading:* What happened to the population of New York City in the thirty five years following the War of 1812 which resulted in the need for more housing?
  
- 3) *Analysis:* Was a lot of thought given to how the formerly large rooms were divided?
  - a) What does this suggest to you about the speed or urgency of the creation of tenement housing?





### Chapter 3: The Mixed Crowd

When once I asked the agent of a **notorious** Fourth Ward alley how many people might be living in it I was told: One hundred and forty families, one hundred Irish, thirty-eight Italian, and two that spoke the German tongue...One may find for the asking an Italian, a German, a French, African, Spanish, Bohemian, Russian, Scandinavian, Jewish, and Chinese colony. Even the Arab, who peddles "holy earth" from the Battery as a direct **importation** from Jerusalem, has his **exclusive** preserves at the lower end of Washington Street. The one thing you shall vainly ask for in the chief city of America is a distinctively American community. There is none; certainly not among the tenements. Where have they gone to, the old inhabitants? I put the question to one who might fairly be presumed to be of the number, since I had found him sighing for the "good old days" when the legend "no Irish need apply" was familiar in the advertising columns of the newspapers. He looked at me with a puzzled air. "I don't know," he said. "I wish I did. Some went to California in '49, some to the war and never came back. The rest, I expect, have gone to heaven, or somewhere. I don't see them 'round here."

...New York's wage-earners have no other place to live, more is the pity. They are truly poor for having no better homes; **waxing** poorer in purse as the **exorbitant** rents to which they are tied, as ever was serf to soil, keep rising. The wonder is that they are not all corrupted, and speedily, by their surroundings. If, on the contrary, there be a steady working up, if not out of the **slough**, the fact is a powerful argument for the optimist's belief that the world is, after all, growing better, not worse, and would go far toward disarming **apprehension**, were it not for the steadier growth of the **sediment** of the slums and its constant menace.

As emigration from east to west follows the latitude, so does the foreign influx in New York distribute itself along certain well-defined lines that waver and break only under the stronger pressure of a more **gregarious** race or the encroachments of **inexorable** business. A feeling of dependence upon mutual effort, natural to strangers in a strange land, unacquainted with its language and customs, sufficiently accounts for this.... A map of the city, colored to designate nationalities, would show more stripes than on the skin of a zebra, and more colors than any rainbow.

### Chapter 3 - Analysis Questions

- 1) *Close Reading:* Were there many American born citizens living in the tenements?
  
- 2) *Contextualization:* Tenements were created out of the large grand homes of knickerbocker (dutch) aristocrats who lived in New York years earlier. Where did they go according to the interview the author conducts?

- 3) *Close Reading*: What does “A map of the city, colored to designate nationalities, would show more stripes than on the skin of a zebra, and more colors than any rainbow...” mean?

#### **Chapter 4: The Downtown Back-Alleys**

One day, I witnessed a fire in the tenements. When the blinding effect of the flash had passed away and I could see once more, I discovered that a lot of paper and rags that hung on the wall were ablaze. There were six of us, five blind men and women who knew nothing of their danger, and myself, in an attic room with a dozen crooked, rickety stairs between us and the street, and as many households as helpless as the one whose guest I was all about us. The thought: how were they ever to be got out? made my blood run cold as I saw the flames creeping up the wall, and my first impulse was to bolt for the street and shout for help. The next was to smother the fire myself, and I did, with a vast deal of trouble. Afterward, when I came down to the street I told a friendly policeman of my trouble. For some reason he thought it rather a good joke, and laughed immoderately at my concern lest even then sparks should be burrowing in the rotten wall that might yet break out in flame and destroy the house with all that were in it. He told me why, when he found time to draw breath. "Why, don't you know," he said, "that house is the Dirty Spoon? It caught fire six times last winter, but it wouldn't burn. The dirt was so thick on the walls, it smothered the fire!" Which, if true, shows that water and dirt, not usually held to be harmonious elements, work together for the good of those who insure houses...

#### **Chapter 4 - Analysis Questions**

- 1) *Close Reading*: How many people were in the room with the author when the room caught on fire?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 2) *Close Reading*: How did the structural elements of the tenement make the fire and escape even more dangerous?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 3) *Analysis*: What does the policeman's reaction to the authors concerns tell you about the conditions in the tenements?

## Vocabulary

**Tenant** - person who rents a space

**Promiscuous** -immoral

**Harbor** - keeping or protecting

**Industrious** - hard working

**Thoroughfares** - roads

**Ventilation** - fresh air in a room

**Tenement** - small cramped living space

**Mosaic** - pattern or design

**Sullen** - gloomy

**Notorious** - famous for negative reasons

**Importation** - bring into a country

**Exclusive** - unique

**Waxing**- increase

**Exorbitant** - excessively high

**Slough** - swamp

**Apprehension** - anxiety, worry

**Sediment** - residue

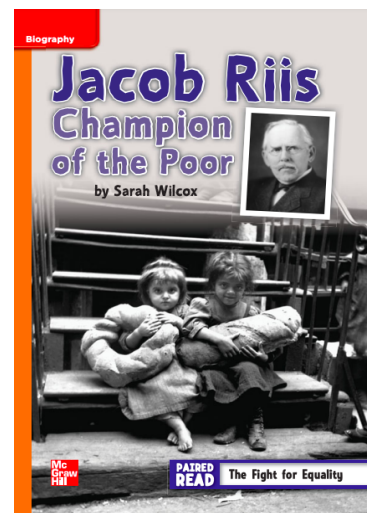
**Gregarious** - talkative or friendly

**Inexorable** - impossible to stop

## Additional Resources

PBS LearningMedia  
**Video & Discussion Questions**

### Free Biography Reader



### More Free Biographies